

When Watsonville was in the limelight 25 years ago

Yellowed newspaper clippings are all that remain of the story which won the Register-Pajaronian the highest honor in journalism 25 years ago today.

The Pulitzer Prize gold medal for public service, most often awarded to crusading metropolitan newspapers, had never before been given to a small-town daily.

The hundreds of articles tell a confusing story, one which never let up in its daily drama. In essence, it was the tale of a Santa Cruz County district attorney who was elected to office on a campaign promise to wipe out vice and corruption in the county, only — as the Register-Pajaronian discovered — to be connected to those affairs himself. Charles Moore eventually resigned after 13 months on the job, following a grand jury accusation of wilful and corrupt misconduct in office.

The most dramatic moment came in October 1955, when two R-P staff members were held at gunpoint and their camera destroyed when they interrupted a midnight rendezvous between Moore and a Freedom gambling figure.

Moore appeared on the front page continuously through 1955. He entered office as a novelty; at 28, he was the youngest D.A. in the state. A man ahead of his time, Moore was elected using television. "Television and I got along splendidly," he commented after he trounced incumbent June Borina.

He pledged to clean up the "major vice situation which has existed for years" in Santa Cruz County.

His first target was cardrooms. Moore ordered all cardrooms in Watsonville closed under an obscure 1911 city ordinance. City irritation with Moore was compounded when, the day Moore took office, a "legal" cardroom opened just outside the city limits on property owned by

Moore's chief contributor, Raymond Jehl. It was later discovered Jehl's cardroom had an illegal blackjack game going behind a guarded door.

To modify the city ordinance took several weeks; in the meantime, the Jehl cardroom had a monopoly in the area.

The largest scandal revolved around Moore's crusade to banish pinball machines from the county, but even without that campaign the young district attorney managed to remain a lively news source during his 385 days in office.

For example, Moore said he would personally lead raiding parties throughout the county to get to the bottom of the vice problem. He followed through on his promise with at least three spectacular capers.

In March, he invaded a mortuary after a funeral and had a man's body dragged from the coffin, alleging he had died from foul play. Medical evidence showed the man died of a heart attack.

Later he raided the Roma Hotel on First Street in Watsonville, searching for a house of prostitution. He found none, although he gave the residents quite a stir.

In June, he beat in the door of the headquarters of a labor union and arrested 10 men on gambling charges. His case was dismissed; he had no search warrant.

Moore said the decision was "The worst thing that's happened to law enforcement in 50 years."

Moore threatened to arrest the publisher of the weekly San Lorenzo Valley Sun for criminal libel for an editorial critical of Moore's office operation.

Moore's biggest crusade was to wipe out illegal pinball machines in the county.

Kicking it off was the arrest by one of Moore's team of "special investigators" of a bartender March

12 at an East Lake Avenue bar for allegedly making a \$6 payoff to a pinball player. The bartender, who claimed the money was only change for a \$10 bill, was acquitted.

During the trial, Moore announced that all multiple-coin pinball machines would be confiscated. Eventually, he outlawed all pinball machines in the county.

Machines were picked up throughout the county at Moore's order. But in August three pinball machines owned by Santa Cruz pinball operator Sam Miano were quietly returned.

Then all four of Moore's deputy district attorneys resigned, citing "basic difference over what course of conduct will best serve the public interest."

Eventually it emerged that the staff had quit in protest after they learned of Moore's involvement with a payoff scheme involving Jehl and Miano.

The Register-Pajaronian and the county Grand Jury uncovered evidence of the payoff scheme during the last several months of 1955. The story developed over dozens of hours of testimony and tomes of transcripts and notes. Testimony eventually revealed that Moore and Miano met in the D.A.'s office in July and the pinball operator gave Moore a wad of \$20 bills totalling \$1,500. Moore returned the money the next day, through Jehl. But it was this transaction and indications of more (including one for \$4,000) that were the key factors in the downfall of the state's youngest district attorney.

Miano, who eventually turned state's evidence, and Moore had different accounts of the meeting.

Moore said the money was given as a belated campaign contribution. But he said he couldn't accept it. In fact he said he threw the roll back at Miano, but Miano put the money

back on Moore's desk. Moore said he had Jehl return the money the next day, after he'd thought it over.

Miano's account differed. He said the money was given to Moore after Jehl explained payoffs would keep things calm.

"10 (dollars) a machine every month," Jehl reportedly said. "We don't want to hurt anybody, been too much publicity in the papers..."

Jehl told Miano to see Moore. After Moore inspected Miano's machines Miano said he (Moore) mentioned he had \$8,000 in campaign debts. Miano replied, "I am married, but the wife and I we got no children.... You are a nice young boy I wish you best career...I wish you the best luck, and I will be happy to help you...It's not bribery what I do. I help lots of people before."

The next time the two met, Miano gave Moore the \$1,500. "He said, 'No, no, no, no' but he took the money and shook hands with me and I went away," Miano testified. Jehl returned the money the next day and made it clear to Miano that he was to be the intermediary for further transactions.

The furor over Moore's antics grew, drawing not only an investigation by the county grand jury, but also bringing in state Attorney General Edmund G. (Pat) Brown, who sent a special team to "investigate everything going on" in Santa Cruz County. Newspapers up and down the state began to take interest in the affairs of Watsonville.

Moore charged that three members of the grand jury were tied to vice in the county. He later apologized privately to the grand jury and said he would also do so publicly. He never did.

The event which eventually brought national attention to the Register-Pajaronian was a 1 a.m. confrontation between photographer

Sam Vestal, reporter William Kennedy and Jehl on Oct. 26.

Vestal and Kennedy had gone to Jehl's Freedom home on two phone tips that the district attorney's car was parked there — thus giving proof to accusations that the DA and the gambling figure were connected. Vestal took a picture of the car which had had its license plate covered up by a newspaper. An angry Jehl came out of his house waving a .38 caliber revolver and threatened to kill the pair. He grabbed the camera and smashed it. But Vestal had removed the film and hidden it in his pocket.

When Editor Frank Orr arrived on the scene, Vestal and Kennedy were placed under citizen's arrest by Jehl for trespassing. Before that, Vestal slipped Orr the film. That day's front page showed a photo of Moore's car (license number visible) at Jehl's house — physical evidence linking the DA to the man who had reportedly masterminded the payoff scheme.

The charges against Vestal and Kennedy were dismissed.

Although the DMV identified the car parked at Jehl's house as Moore's, the district attorney at first denied being there. But when he learned the R-P had successfully made off with the film, Moore changed his story.

The district attorney, even under heavy fire, never let up on his own verbal barrages. On Nov. 1, Moore went back on the offensive, reviving charges that the Watsonville city government was corrupt and connected with vice. He also charged that the Register-Pajaronian was "pink or left wing."

"Orr is left winger," Moore charged in a report in the San Francisco Chronicle of the Register-Pajaronian's editor.

Moore's confidence was so high

that on Nov. 4, he told the Chronicle he wouldn't resist being governor or attorney general.

Investigators for the attorney general's office concluded several days before the grand jury issued its report that "Santa Cruz is normal despite all rumors."

Finally on Nov. 16, Moore was officially accused of "misconduct in office" by the grand jury. The accusation, first of its kind in Santa Cruz County, required that Moore stand trial on the accusations and, if convicted, be removed from office. Jehl and Miano were charged with criminal conspiracy to bribe public officials. The jury charged that Moore's accusations against grand jury members were false and malicious; that Moore paid people out of a special investigative fund who weren't doing anything; and that Moore allowed Jehl to use the "color" of the DA's office to establish a conspiracy to solicit bribes.

Moore labeled the accusations a "major victory for organized crime." Moore hired famed San Francisco attorney Melvin Belli to defend him. In January, Jehl was convicted on all four counts against him. Then Moore announced his resignation. Since Moore was no longer district attorney he could not be prosecuted on the accusations.

On May 7, The Register-Pajaronian was awarded the Pulitzer.

(What happened to the principals? Moore entered a seminary and now is a 54-year-old Roman Catholic priest on the Monterey peninsula. Pat Brown, later governor, is a lawyer. Jehl is deceased. Only three present-day Register-Pajaronian news staffers have personal recollections of that hectic time: Orr, the editor; Ward Bushee, the managing editor; and Vestal, the chief photographer.)